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The social formation and cultural identity of Southeast Asian frontier society: Focused on the concept of maritime Zomia as frontier in connection with the ocean and the inland



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Abstract This paper examines the applicability of the Zomia concept for social scientific studies of the Malaysian region, with a focus on the Malaysian port cities, including Melaka. While for both empirical and socio-cultural reasons the term Zomia itself may not be entirely appropriate to the Malaysian Melaka region, the analytical implications that are based on James C. Scott's usage of it, particularly the emphasis on the cultural dynamics of inter-ethnic, inter-national, and inter-religious relations of port areas, can be of great utility to those working in the Malaysian region. Zomia is a neologism gaining popularity with the publication of James C. Scott's provocative book, *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. The term of Zomia is designed to indicate the people who has not been governed by the nation-state and national regime.

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Introduction: rethinking maritime frontiers

Malaysian port cities as open frontiers have been well-known for ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, providing rich materials for the study of social dynamism though the power of nation-building processes transformed them into national territories, reconfiguring regional and transnational connections across maritime frontiers. In this chapter, I examine the history and culture of Melaka (Malacca in English), certainly representing Malaysian port cities, with a focus on its role connecting the ocean and the inland in the East Asian maritime world and the characteristics and meanings of interactions.

Recently scholars (e.g. Andaya (2001, 2008), van Schendel (2002), Scott (2009)) have paid attention to Southeast Asian frontiers, standing on the monumental study of earlier scholars such as Den Hollander (1960, 1961), Leach (1960) and Lattimore (1947) on Asian and European frontiers. It is notable that the recent attention of frontiers has centered on Zomia, upland Southeast Asia, largely thanks to the publication of Scott's book, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). Indeed Scott's idea of Zomia comes from Willem van Schendel. van Schendel (2002: 665) calls scholars' attention to border areas that are systematically missed by conventional approaches of area studies to "to break out of the chrysalis of the area dispensation which occurred after World War II, and to develop new concepts of regional space". In this regard,

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he pays attention to vast areas of the Asian hinterlands that has been invisible in scholarship. The rather arbitrary division into four different world areas (Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia) has blocked scholars from communicating across these divides. He proposes the study of Zomia as a way to challenge some of the biases of area studies (2002: 653–654). Responding to van Schendel's proposal, James Scott provides a new look at historical and cultural dynamics in a vast area of the Southeast Asian hinterlands and inlands with a particular focus on deliberate state-avoidance.

Now it is observable that Zomia as a concept metaphor defines social reality in a way that it describes (cf. [Sahlins \(1981\)](#)). Concept metaphors, such as gender or the French Revolution, “facilitate comparison, frame contexts, levels or domains within which data – however defined – can be compared for similarities and differences” ([Moore, 2004: 75–76](#)). If there is a general agreement on the defining features of a concept metaphor, it serves as paradigmatic to a particular approach on reality. Similarly, area studies use a geographical metaphor to visualize and naturalize particular social spaces as well as a particular scale of analysis. They produce not only specific geographies of knowing but also create geographies of ignorance ([van Schendel, 2002](#)). The term of Zomia, which is becoming influential, itself may inherently shape our historical and social imagination in particular directions. In this regard, Zomia as a concept metaphor can be both a promise and a problem.

Juxtaposing Scott's case with two other definitions of Zomia- one is that Zomia as a concept metaphor can be a promise, and the other is that Zomia as a concept metaphor can be a problem, I call attention to the way where concept metaphors define social landscapes and historical dynamics. Drawing on the work of several Asian area specialists, I suggest a model of ocean-inland relations that does not privilege either a community or the state as a dominant player of society and history. The economic, political, and social formation of Zomia represents a strategic adaptation to avoid incorporation in state structure ([Scott, 2009: 39](#)). Zomia as a “non-state” space is characterized by zones of refuge and by “escape” forms of agriculture and social life though it is currently being erased by the nation-state's incorporation powers ([Scott, 2009: 23, 127, 187, 324–325](#), cited in [Jonsson \(2010\): 192](#)).

Upland Southeast Asia, locus of Zomia, has been resistant to control by lowland nation-states. But this relative resilience has been due to their marginality. A lot of ethnic spaces within the upland Southeast Asian region belong to geographically dispersed and politically fragmented minority populations ([Turner, 2010: 121](#)). Over the years, however, the zones of political and cultural resistance were transformed into the zones of economic development with the intervention of the state ([Nyiri, 2012: 533–562](#)).

Is it possible to apply the notion of Zomia to the explanation of the social formations of maritime or watery frontier societies in Southeast Asia including Malaysia? I argue that it can have relevancy in dealing with maritime or watery frontier societies which have experienced the historical and social dynamics of multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural formations. Port cities have represented maritime frontiers and connected the ocean and the inland. Here Melaka as a conspicuous port city has been a hub of watery frontier societies. The concept of Zomia is debatable one. As I mentioned

above, Zomia as a concept metaphor can be both a promise and a problem. I think that Zomia as a concept metaphor can be a problem rather than a promise.

From this point of view on Scott's concept of Zomia, I do explain and (re)interpret the history and culture of Melaka in connection with the ocean and the inland in the East Asian maritime with the notion of ‘watery Zomia’ or ‘waterly frontier’. This explanation and (re)interpretation addresses that the different patterns or types of migration were prevalent in the maritime world before European invasion and this flow linked ethnicity and urbanism ([Hall, 2006: 454](#)).

In my opinion, by examining the widespread patterns of sojourners and inhabitants moving across the maritime world, it is emphasized that the development of urbanism rested on shifting population, not on the static settlements of people in one place at one time. In this regard, I argue that it is important to focus on the social formations and transformations of cultural mosaics or of sojourners and inhabitants as their ways of lives. It is fact that Scott provides a new perspective on the concept of frontier and Zomia. And Scott regards the concept of frontier and Zomia as the terminology of deliberate state-avoidance. However, there are similarities and differences between Scott's terminology of frontier and the terminology of watery frontier or waterly Zomia concept. From this critical point of view, I emphasize that the concept of waterly Zomia has close relationship with the concept of verandah or window to have connection to the ocean and the inland in maritime world. In Southeast Asian maritime world, seaports like Melaka as a bridge of maritime networks, had an important role to connect with the ocean and the inland. In this regard, the concept of waterly frontier is different from Scott's concept of Zomia or frontier as the area of deliberate state-avoidance. Therefore, I emphasize that it should be understood that the concept of waterly frontier is different from the concept of Zomia, based upon Scott's Southeast Asian studies, focused on the inland Southeast Asian areas. I argue that waterly frontier has been not only an open space to exchange multiple cultures and histories, but also a zone of state-avoidance in Southeast Asian maritime world.

In this sense, it is necessary that Scott's critique of Zomia can be connected to the case of Melaka port city.

The East Asian maritime world and the formation of port cities as maritime frontiers

The East Asian maritime world consisting of inlands, islands, seas and oceans stretches across many countries and diverse ethnic groups. It has been central in cultural and commercial networks in the world. Connecting the region and the rest of the world, it has accommodated multiracial, multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-religious communities. In this sense, cultural pluralism and dynamism have been deep inside the East Asian maritime world.

Over history, the sea has been intertwined with human societies and their relations. Individual East Asian islands developed networks with other islands and among them particular islands functioned as hubs for collection and distribution in the networks. The islands maintained autonomy which is an inherent nature of their societies. Together with islands, the sea was connected to coastal commercial cities and migrant cities. Combining commerce and migration, this maritime world actively formed urban networks.

Interrelationships and linkages between the inland and the ocean were pivotal in the formation of diverse networks in the maritime world. Long-distance networks activated commercial relations or migration processes. Using the networks, sovereign authorities had access to commerce, occupying port cities as key control points. Despite the occupation, the trade and migration networks were not disconnected from inland areas. Rather, it opened new opportunities to extend their political and cultural influence to the open sea. At all events, the East Asian maritime world has been a cultural, religious, and commercial meeting place. Above all, its port cities have mediated various places. From a historical perspective, they functioned as veranda or window paving a way to a broader world. It was through port cities that commercial and cultural interactions took place in the East Asian maritime world.

Religious and cultural inflows from foreign countries were blended with indigenous cultural forms and this mix-up in turn created a vigorous cosmopolitanism in the East Asian maritime world. The rulers of East Asian kingdoms had a keen interest in establishing its presence in pursuit of commercial opportunities with foreign countries. These kingdoms' political, economic, and cultural power rested on port cities that had commercial relations with foreign merchants, drawing significant revenue from taxes on commerce. They gave a special treatment to foreign merchants while attempting to restrict wealthy indigenous elite class. Foreign merchants were encouraged to keep associating their business with their mother countries not only because they facilitated cultural, commercial relations but also because their accumulation of wealth benefited the rulers. Foreigners even became appointed as officers to collect customs and taxes and also keep social order in port cities. However, they were restricted to higher positions which were occupied by kingdoms' noble classes.

After the 17th century, Chinese merchants began to be dominant in this area and subsequently took up the role of middlemen. In 1517, when Spanish colonialists fortified Manila, there were few Chinese traders. Until the late of 16th century, Manila was the center of the East Asian maritime world. From Fujian province, especially Xiamen, Chinese silk and ceramic were carried to Manila and then to Mexico. Spanish galleons transported such items to Acapulco in Mexico and Venice (Venezia) in Europe. Silver in East Asia was also transported to European markets via the Manila-Acapulco-Venezia sea road. Chinese ships too rode in this route and carried silver from Mexico back to their mother country. In 1775, the amount of silver flowing in China from Mexico surpassed that of Japanese silver. Chinese merchants played a role in connecting European markets with East Asian colonial port cities constructed by European people. Silver reached colonial port cities through Chinese ships (Tagliacozzo, 2004: 23–25).

Equal to Manila, Melaka's position and role cannot be stressed too much in the formation of the East Asian maritime world. One of the most important goods that Melaka mediated between the East and the West was spice. In the age of discovery, though it is difficult to trace its origin, the expeditions of Spain, Portugal and England were increasingly dispatched to look for spice. From the early 16th century to the first half of 19th century, they more safely assured economic interest and acquired a significant amount of profit by exclusively controlling spice. They took advantage of existing hierarchy and prestige and exploited indigenous people in pursuit of wealth.

By the late 19th century, they strengthened their position and substantially colonized the areas.

In 1511, Portugal occupied the capital of Melaka Sultanate and advanced to many islands of the Malay world including Maluku which used to be the original production area of spice. With the fall of Melaka, Melaka Sultanate's capital moved to Johor and newly established the kingdom of Johor. However, since the latter part of the 17th century, its power had dramatically weakened and by the 18th century, most of the sultan kingdoms like Melaka became extinct.

As European powers began to strengthen their position, they attempted to place the sea under their control. In the 15th century, before Portugal fleets passed the Indian Ocean, maritime defensive zones did not exist in port cities while in continental areas, in order to defend the attacks of nomadic people or territorial states, defensive zones were established. Unlike them, the Indian Ocean, though under the influence of Islam, was not the exclusive Islam sea but open and shared by many people. However, European powers such as Portugal, Netherlands and England built strong maritime traffic fortresses and set up artillery in order to control sea paths by force. They also dispatched warships and patrolled the sea which was turning into an exclusive and monopolized space. European power transformed the Indian Ocean.

The maritime world stretching from the Indian Ocean to South China Sea developed a highly interconnected network. Here, diverse people scattered but connected, practicing various religions and languages while maintaining social order centering on port cities. During the period from the 15th century to the 17th century, the Kingdom of Ryukyu emerged and engaged in mediating between the Indian Ocean and the islands of Japan and Korea. It is existing commercial networks of the Indian Ocean where European powers rode into advance into Asia.

In particular, both the Islamic world and the maritime world shared common networks. Islamic networks expanded towards the East and became connected with Indian Ocean maritime networks. The networks were based in relationships among various groups of people. Meanwhile, each group's position was firmly secured on the grounds of fiduciary relationships acknowledged by other groups. In another word, they had to cultivate an equal, mutual and complementary "contractual relationship" and observe it. Besides, in the development of the networks, the Indian Ocean world acted as a meeting place that brought together environmental, biological, natural, human, and cultural differences in East Asia.

Generally speaking, the water unites and the land divides (Sutherland, 2007: 27, 55–56). But "land and sea were linked by interlocking webs of collecting centres, markets, entrepôts and feeder routes" (Sutherland, 2007: 31). In this sense, it can be said that geography is destiny (Sutherland, 2007: 55). My visit to Melaka in 2007 and 2008 affirmed the story. The city of Melaka are located on a narrow coastal plain formed by the Melaka river and small streams, and separated from the districts to the north and south by coastal mountains that sweep down to the Straits of Melaka and the Indian Ocean. The development of Melaka as port city rested on these geographical features that connect the ocean and the inland mixed with narrow river valleys and mountainous lands. This topography that is formed by narrow river valleys, coastal plains, lagoons, and a few broad deltas is common in large parts of Southeast Asia and southern China.

Water heavily influenced the life and outlooks of coastal peoples, fostering a maritime-oriented culture and a geographical worldview that is associated with trans-national and trans-regional history and connections. This orientation toward seas and rivers has led some historians to refer to a “water frontier,” a single region stretching from southern China to both coasts of the Malay Peninsula and Java Sea in connection with the Straits of Melaka, a part of the maritime “Silk Road” of the Indian Ocean (Andaya, 2001, 2008; Emmerson, 1980; Hall, 1985; Lockard, 2010; Sutherland, 2007; Tagliacozzo, 2004). Hence, it can be seen as one long maritime avenue, with diverse sub-branches, that transcends political and national boundaries.

From this angle, Southeast Asia including the Straits of Melaka and the Malay Archipelago, the Indian Ocean, and southern China, linked by the seas and the ocean, became part of the full canvas of interaction as well as of a cohesive trade network that also came to include the Sulu, the Philippines, the Ryukyu Islands, East China Sea, Yellow Sea, Japanese islands, and Korean islands, and so on.

On the other hand, the East Asian maritime world had one dominant political and economic power, China, which had connections with numerous smaller states. This huge but politically fragmented and often sparsely populated region around “a sea common to all” (Lockard, 2010: 219) spawned fluid ethnicities, dynamic transnational economic zones, and flexible political boundaries while waterborne commerce that was facilitated by the string of ports was an essential component in the making of the region. This interactive canvas also linked mainland Southeast Asia with maritime Southeast Asia in a myriad of exchanges. In the water frontier, many people traveled as often by boat as by land, and quite a few relied on maritime trade, smuggling, raiding, or piracy for their survival.

Fishing peoples of southern China made their living in a close attachment to the sea. The same was true of many peoples of Southeast Asia, including Malays and Javanese. Some scholars refer to the coastal peoples as “littoral societies”. Their locations and porous frontiers acted as filters. Aquaculture where the salt of the sea meets the silt of the land was the norm (Lockard, 2010: 221).

It was not just water but also “seafarers” or “sea people”, including seafaring traders that linked the distant shores. The maritime traders congregated in ports, linking the hinterland to the wider world. Places that were blessed with good location, usable harbors, adequate warehouse facilities, and ample supplies of food and water became seaport cities, super-centers for trade. These port cities were not necessarily final destinations but mostly mediating points in an ever-changing political and economic environment. Port centers in Asia, especially Southeast Asia, comprised ethnically and culturally diverse communities, and allowed officials of foreign birth or ancestry, who knew the cultures and languages of the foreign merchants, to supervise the trade. These ports fostered not just economic but also cultural exchange.

The geographical condition of the East Asian maritime world has promoted interactions between the sea and the inland through trade and market exchange. There have been a number of merchants, traders, and seafarers in port cities and their surroundings. The East Asian maritime world has a diverse connection, linking the islands in the Indian Ocean, the Straits of Melaka and the South China Sea. It has served as a sea route.

In particular three questions draw our attention when it comes to the construction of the East Asian maritime world encompassing coastal areas and their hinterland surroundings. The multi-cultural areas were shaped through the long period of interconnections and what can be called the “East Asian Maritime Silk Road” emerged. The first is how the formation of the East Asian maritime world was meaningful in the historical point of view. The second is how the people who have been relying on the East Asian maritime world have marked their presence in this region. The third is what the implications of its historical construction in the present time are.

The East Asian maritime world encompasses the history and culture of port cities that connected between the ocean and the inland. It divides into many nation-states, regions, and areas. Also it consists of small and simple societies and diverse ethnic groups. The East Asian sea as an agency provided a spot for human and material interactions and network-making. It has promoted multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural communities. The pluralism of the East Asian maritime world has been a fundamental feature and generated cultural dynamics.

Never being self-reliant, the islands in the East Asian sea have established an extensive network with other islands. The sea has been mingled with various human groups and developed complex relations. In this network, port cities have been focal points of collection and distribution of goods and services from the ocean and the inland.

Meanwhile, from the maritime cultural point of view, we can also say that the islands have retained their autonomy and own forms of life styles that are distinct from the outer world, to a certain extent. However, apart from the islands, the maritime world accumulated its revenues and resources through commerce and trade in port cities. In this sense, we can say that the islands of the maritime world have been more active and dynamic than land-locked cities controlled by kingdoms and nation-states.

The deepening of interrelationship between the sea and the inland has promoted a widespread network that has encompassed many islands, seas, and port cities across the region. We can search for such a long distant network model developed by trade or commerce relations and various types of migration. Sovereign authorities built up themselves, riding on this maritime network and centering on port cities. Port cities were considered as key points in the making of polities. Trade and migration networks in the maritime world did not exclude land-based governance. They extensively carried cultural features of port cities into inland areas. Along with the networks, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, and multi-cultural dynamics were widespread across the region. The main function of port cities was to invigorate trade and commerce across political boundaries through maritime networks. It has been difficult for land-based kingdoms and nation-states to dominate maritime commerce. Central powers, in their attempt to expand influence, even adopted policies that promoted the flexible utilization of maritime networks.

There has been an interrelationship between the ocean including islands and seas, and the inland including both highlands and lowlands. Bargaining, colliding and interactions have surely taken place in the everyday lives of people such as traders, merchants, migrants, islanders, fishermen, and seafarers. It is obvious that port cities as maritime frontiers accommodated different types of social systems and structures.

In this regard, they have been cultural, religious and commercial meeting places over history. Maritime frontier societies have been in connection with the outer world through networks encompassing the sea and the inland. Port cities served as outlets through which the two geographical domains imagined, projected, and encountered each other. They were exposed to the global flow of goods while building up relations with the outer world.

Melaka's history and culture in the context of the East Asian maritime world

The basis for the formation of the East Asian maritime network was relationships that various actors had built up. Meanwhile, individual interest was stably secured, based on strategic relationship acknowledged by counterparts. In another words, they had to cultivate an equal, mutual, complementary and contractual relationship which they had to observe. Network expansion relied on this type of relationship.

The Indian Ocean world has promoted a cultural exchange across the East Asian maritime world, bringing together environmental, biological, natural, and cultural differences and similarities. It is notable that trading networks in the Indian Ocean during the era of 1300–1500 has drawn a significant attention from scholars of cultural history (Andaya, 2001, 2008; Reid, 1988; Tagliacozzo, 2004). They pay an attention less to the exchange of products than to the membership of trading communities, the relationships among merchant communities, and regional cultural and economic consequences.

What draws our particular attention is that this sub-region of the international East–West maritime route took on free-flowing maritime trade and cultural identities immediately prior to the Portuguese seizure of Melaka in 1511. It is necessary to note an alternative understanding of regional trade requires maritime diasporas and other networked relationships. In doing so we can focus on networking between secondary and primary centers one of which was Melaka as a port city and deepen our knowledge on early urbanization in the East Asian maritime world (cf. Hall (2008)).

The geographical and historical condition of Melaka provided a significant source for the formation and transformation of human and material networks. The culture of peoples' lives in Melaka was underpinned by such a geographic condition that was in connection with the East Asian maritime world. From a historical perspective, Melaka has been one of the most important key links among the Straits of Melaka, the South China Sea, the Java Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific. What has made Melaka conspicuous is that it has connected between the ocean and the inland in the Straits of Melaka, the Malay Peninsula and their surroundings. It provides a road to the Indian Ocean. The East Asian maritime world consists of three major components: the sea, the ports, and the inland with coastal areas. Although the components are different in types of geographical conditions, they became interconnected areas and formed parts of the maritime "Silk Road" or the "East Asian Sea Silk Road".

It is well explored that people living along the fringes of the nation-state assert a sense of cultural distinctiveness in a political environment marked by social and economic inequality (Johnson, 2011). It has been a famous story that Melaka is the historical root of Malaysian cultural heritage or Malaysian

culture itself. Melaka has been well-known as a distinctive place where visitors should visit to delve into the essence of Malaysian culture. However, Melaka is not only a center for cultural heritage but also embraces a core icon of modern Malaysian identity (Watson, 1996).

It is notable that Melaka had a special and significant status in the formation process of the East Asian maritime world. One of the most important goods Melaka dealt with was spice. From the early 16th century to the first half of the 19th century, in the East Asian maritime world, Spain and Portugal exclusively controlled spice trade and by doing so more stably secured their economic interest and achieved significant profit. Taking advantage of existing hierarchy and prestige, they exploited indigenous people in this area. European colonial dominance in the early 16th century in the East Asian maritime world was substantially different from that in the late 19th century.

Melaka is not just the city where Malay culture originated. It was the first city in the Malay Peninsula where Chinese began to settle down and cultural hybridity deeply took root. It is the main reason that Melaka should be considered in the context of Malaysian cultural diversity, complexity, and hybridity. Ever since Melaka was officially named 'bandar bersejarah dan berbudaya' (historic and cultural city) according to the Malaysian government in 1992, it has represented Malaysian culture and history (State Government of Melaka 1992). Like other areas in Malaysia, Melaka preserves the characteristics of multi-ethnic society. In Melaka, urban culture formed by the mix-up of various lingual and ethnic groups including Malays, Chinese, Indians, indigenous people, and European descendants has been deeply marked. In spite of the spread and influence of Islam among the Malays, Melaka accommodates multi-religions such as Islam, Taoism, Hinduism, Christianity, and so on.

The 15th century sultanate of Melaka came to represent the ancestral state of what is known as Peninsular Malaysia today. It tended to be distinct from other pre-colonial states that spanned the Straits of Melaka where Melaka was intimately linked throughout history. Thus, it came to serve, much as Majapahit did for Indonesia, as a geographical forerunner of the modern Malaysian state (Reid, 1979). However, Melaka's heritage and its foundation associated with Sumatra became omitted since the Malaysian state has shown little interest in the Srivijayan past or in archeological work that cannot be closely identified with a 'Malay' ethnicity (Andaya, 2001; Reid, 2001).

During the period from the early 16th century to the 17th century, Melaka was an international commercial port. At that time, a variety of commercial exchanges and trading activities among diverse groups took place in Melaka to the extent that 84 kinds of languages were spoken (The Suma Oriental of Pires, 2005). It is evident that Melaka witnessed dynamic cultural exchanges or interactions among people.

It is interesting to discover how Melaka came to represent the ethnic heritage and relations. It is apparent that in the representation, the Malay population is celebrated and the Portuguese are hybridized, while the Indians and Chinese, despite their historical importance in the city, are largely ignored, although recently there have been attempts to include other legacies and acclaim a more cosmopolitan Malaysian identity. Whose heritage represents Melaka is contentious. Melaka is represented in Malaysia's tourist and heritage

industries as the place 'where it all began' (Worden, 2001: 199). This slogan came out in the context of the cultural policies of the Malaysian state in the 1970s and 1980s when the political and religious traditions of the pre-colonial Melakan Sultanate, colonial rule and the modern Malaysian state were constructed. The emphasis on ethnic Malay heritage naturalized that of other Melakan inhabitants such as the Portuguese Eurasians and the Peranakans, and ignored that of the majority, the Chinese immigrants of later periods. Malaysian cultural representation in the 1990s was shifted to a modernizing, multi-ethnic nation in which a feudal past plays a lesser role.

The cultural and ethnic diversity of Melaka reminds us that the dynamics of cultural and political fields of Southeast Asia problematize any overall application of terms like 'shatterbelt'. Melaka was never shattered with cultural, religious and ethnic differences. Rather, it accommodated them and became a multicultural, cosmopolitan hot spot. In this openness, it functioned as a maritime frontier for the outer world. It was an evident stronghold for a number of merchants and commercial immigrants over history. As a cosmopolitan trading port city Melaka connected the sea world with the inland area by promoting diverse and complex maritime activities. It played a central role in forming the East Asian maritime world. Melaka as one of the most famous international port cities in Southeast Asia had systematic relationships with other port cities and functioned as a center in maritime networks linking to the various inland kingdoms. It also acted as a cultural broker and mediated between the ocean and the inland. Performing this role, Melaka became marked with cultural hybridity and mixed identity.

Meanwhile, Malaysian tourism documents suggest visitors to go to Melaka to know the historical roots of Malaysia. My research on Melaka particularly engages in that point. Melaka symbolizes not just the result of cultural heritage marketing. It also significantly embodies a constructed core icon of modern Malaysia identity.

As mentioned above, Melaka had experienced Western colonialism for 300 years since its colonization from the Portuguese invasion in 1511. After Portuguese and Dutch invasion, Melaka came to be under British colonial rule. Western colonial policy played a vital role in forming multiethnic society in Melaka. Under the influence of Western colonial rules, Melaka was a general meeting place for Islam of Malay people, Buddhism and Taoism of Chinese people, and Hinduism of Tamil people. The characteristics and meanings of Melaka culture were formed and transformed, going through the processes of adopting or rejecting various types of culture and religion under Western colonial control.

The best place to show cultural hybridity and ethnic mosaic is 'Jongker Street' or 'Harmony Street' in another name. Here, Hindu temples and Buddhist temples coexisted in a very close distance. This is a symbolic place for showing the combination and harmony of ethnic groups represented by Malays, Indians, and Chinese. It says that Masjid Kampung Kling in the Street is the representative of religious lives in East Asia; it is the oldest temple in Melaka. Kampung means 'village' in Malays. Kling had meant Indian Muslims who migrated from India to Malay world in the past, and later it became a common name for early Islamic believers.

In the center of the mosque, there is a fountain where believers wash their hands and feet as well as other parts of

their bodies before worshipping. It is a place for purification. A lot of Masjids have been built so that Muslims can have more space and opportunities for their religious activities. They symbolize Islamic prestige, and reflect Muslims' religious piety and influence.

An investigation into family backgrounds tells that people who controlled the port city tended to mobilize their own political authority and economic wealth and establish an overarching order across various groups of people. The formation of Melaka as a trade center represents the prosperity of Islam in the East Asian maritime world. Even though Muslim merchants began to communicate with East Asia around the end of the 7th century, it might be said that the conversion of local leaders after the 13th century as a result of the efforts of Muslim merchants across the Indian Ocean played a great role in the spread and prosperity of Islam. Records left regarding interactions between local monarchs and Muslim merchants reaching the Strait of Malacca passing through the Indian Ocean indicate that Islam began to be accepted from the end of 13 century (Tagliacozzo, 2004: 25–26). The sea road from Arab and Indian port cities to the Strait of Malacca provided an outlet for the merchants to conduct their long-distance trade based on common contractual principles that in turn contributed a lot to the proliferation of commercial activities.

There is a Hindu temple on the left side of Masjid Kampung Kling. The Hindu temple was built for indigenous people who migrated from Tamil areas in southern India to Melaka to maintain their own religious ritual and customs. Worshippers burn incense towards the temple everyday and make their wishes to various Hindu deities. The Tamil who had migrated from Tamil Nadu area in southern India have also adapted to local culture while their own form of cultural tradition have been retained. They established themselves as one of the major ethnic groups in Melaka, identifying themselves as Malaysian Indians.

Chinese people who had migrated to the Malay Peninsula settled down and constructed Malaysian Chinese society. Mostly coming from Fujian province in southern China, they formed the oldest Chinese society in Malaysia. Their history traces back to the 15th century when Melaka as the largest port city in the Strait of Malacca boosted maritime commerce. The first Chinese society was formed in the northeast part of Melaka where the oldest Chinese artifacts in Malaysia were found. The hill called Bukit Cina in the area that has been used as a Chinese graveyard evidences the presence of the Chinese.

Qing Yun Ting (or Cheng Hoon Teng) temple is one of typical Chinese temples in Melaka. On the roof of the temple are sculpted various images appearing in Chinese myths. Worshipers burn paper money and incense in the center of the temple. The temple accommodates various deities of folklore and other religions as well, for instance Guan Yu (觀音) and Bodhisattva. It evidently tells us that Taoism and Buddhism became mixed and that syncretism characterizes the belief systems of Malaysian Chinese.

As seen, the coexistence of the temples of Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism in Harmony Street also reveals this syncretism. The construction of ethnicity and culture was based on it. Melaka accommodated various cultures and produced cultural hybridity. Apart from cultural mix-up represented by Baba-Nyonya in Chinese society, Chitty culture symbolizes localized Indian people, Islam accommodates Malay cultural practices and European culture became hybrid.

Melaka was a strategic locale that created hybrid forms of cultures by the accommodation of migration flows and heterogeneous cultures. In doing so, Melaka became a cultural hot spot where various ethnic groups made full use of the social environment and were willing to join the formation of cultural hybridity. This process of creating cultural hybridity is dominant part of Melaka's history.

It is undeniable that Melaka is the best example of cultural hybridity in Malaysia, as evident from the presence of the groups of Baba Cina and Peranakan who settled down and have lived there since a long time ago when Melaka used to be a colony. In their culture, Chinese and Malay cultural elements were well mixed-up and transformed into a distinct cultural form. European descendents who inherit the mix-up heritage of Portugal and Malay marks their presence while the groups of Indian Baba or Melaka Chitty absorbed local Malay culture in their Hindu cultural practices and created a unique cultural form.

It is well known that Malay culture in Melaka provides historical and cultural foundation for the formation of Malayness in modern times. Relationships between rulers and common people and the model of Melaka Sultanate have been reference points for the construction of Malay identity. Melaka Sultan's charter displays how the unique historical experiences of Melaka at that time have been transmitted up to now. But in a historical viewpoint, Malay culture, although it is often said to be formed under the influence of traditional political structures of Sultanates and stably carry homogeneous characteristic, its formation has been going through interactions and dramatic changes up until now. Malayness is not an end-product but an open-ended and processual one. Especially given that tourism policies under the support of the Malaysian government and the Melaka local government as well have exerted an important influence on the cultural positioning of various ethnic groups in Melaka, their ethnic identities have been adapting to new cultural conditions. These cultural settings should be considered as critical factors on the state of cultural hybridity in Melaka.

What Melaka's culture and history inspire above all in the modern form of urban culture is that multicultural coexistence and tolerance were in full bloom. Melaka as an intermediary port has connected the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea in the network of the East Asian Sea Silk Road and migrants and merchants enjoyed the openness of Melaka and interacted with other people. This environment produced a distinctive urban culture. Under Western colonial rules, Melaka underwent transformation with diverse cultural colors, mixing various ethnic groups. Eventually "Melakaness" or "Cara Melaka", a unique frontier identity, became invented.

Concluding remarks

The view of "the sea as common to all" (Lockard, 2010: 219; Sutherland, 2007: 27) has been evidenced in the East Asian maritime world where merchants, traders, sailors, and coastal peoples have enjoyed the openness of the sea. Port cities like Melaka played a crucial role in fostering the maritime trade of this world and creating intimate trade networks as a result. Long before the era of Western dominance, Asian merchants including Chinese had linked port cities and their hinterlands to the hemispheric trade nexus. They served as fields of

economic exchange as well as cosmopolitan gateways for the import and export of people, goods, and ideas (Lockard, 2010: 245).

In this sense, the cultural scape of Melaka can be understood from a viewpoint that accounts for the lifestyle pattern of Orang Laut (sea people/sea gypsies/seafarers). Then we can come up with an entirely original set of understanding Melaka that highlights notions of mobility, unbounded space, multiple places, and seafaring networks. In the similar vein, it is important to look at Melaka and its trade networks beyond national and geopolitical boundaries that restrict our geographical imagination. Indeed, recent processes of intense economic, social and spatial integration across Southeast Asia demand us to develop a fresh framework of analysis that can deal with social phenomena such as cultural hybridity, transnationalism, diaspora cultures, multiple identities, cross-border networks and flows, and porous liquid boundaries.

The term of 'a golden age' that describes the heyday of Melaka has been proven as a crucial material whereby Malaysia has attempted to construct a national Malay-focused identity and also promote tourism. State-driven cultural policies during the 1970s and 1980s appealed to the primordial politico-religious traditions of a pre-colonial, feudal Muslims sultanate in conceiving the identity of the modern Malaysian nation and displayed in this fashion Melaka's heritage to Malaysian visitors as well as international tourists. Melaka was appropriated as 'a symbol for the nation' and as 'the creator of the values and norms of a wider notion of Malayness' based on an idealized and pure form of Islam stripped of any magical, pre-Islamic elements.

However, it was not without problems because the concrete evidences of its importance as the early center of Islam and Malayness such as buildings and material culture had disappeared and became replaced by European (Portuguese, Dutch, and British) colonial buildings and Chinese shops. Melaka's application for a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the late 1980s was rejected because the waterfront area and historic harbor had been destroyed by reclamation projects and reconstructed in an attempt to present what the state thought Melaka should have been and ought to be. Another application submission in the late 1990s met with criticism because non-Malay traditions, marked in the urban landscape and architecture, notably those of the Chinese and particularly the hybrid Baba Nyonya or Straits-born Chinese, were neglected in official, state-sponsored representations.

Indeed, it is problematic that 'feudal' Melaka, with its reconstructed wooden sultan's palace, the Historic City Memorial Garden in Islamic design, and the Cultural Museum with its emphasis on traditional court ritual and ceremony, and as the repository of a long-established indigenous culture and the political traditions of kingdom, represents a modernizing multi-ethnic Malaysian nation and especially the aspirations of a rapidly expanding Malay middle class. Interestingly Malaysia in the 1990s began to move away from retrospective Malay identity to a future-oriented one where Kuala Lumpur as the capital of the country was employed as a symbol of a full-fledged industrial country that would be aimed to come true by the year 2020 (Watson, 1996). Recent representations of Melaka also emphasize a more modernized, commercialized leisure and recreation center (Hitchcock and King, 2003: 6-7).

The importance of culture and national ideology differs from location to location. Melaka has focused on Malay culture, especially in the midst of the emergence of the nation-state and its representation. It has been contentious that the cultural representation of Chinese, Indian and Orang Asli has been neglected in its Malay-centeredness. This process, which reflects political, economic and ethnic dominance, is easily hidden behind the inconspicuous label of cultural villages or cultural theme parks (Hoffstaedter, 2008: 156).

In conclusion, I emphasize that it is possible to apply the notion of Zomia to the explanation of the social formations of maritime or watery frontier societies in Southeast Asia including Malaysia. I say yes. It is the reason why Melaka was one of the most important watery frontier societies in Southeast Asian maritime world. As I mentioned above, I reemphasize that it can have relevancy in dealing with maritime or watery frontier societies which have experienced the historical and social dynamics of multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural formations. Port cities have represented maritime frontiers and connected the ocean and the inland. In this regard, Melaka as a seaport has been a hub of watery frontier societies. Melaka as a bridge of maritime networks, had an important role to connect with the sea and the land. In other words, it can be concluded that watery frontier has been not only an open space to exchange multiple cultures and histories, but also a zone of state-avoidance in Southeast Asian maritime world. From historical and cultural point of view, it can be said that Melaka has been one of the most important and meaningful watery frontier societies in Southeast Asian maritime world.

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